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ABSTRACT

Conflict is a basic social process; there is no conceivable way of removing all conflict from an organization. Interpersonal conflict, often created by interdependency of people and tasks within an organization, lowers staff morale and employee productivity and drives people away. Difficult employees who foster conflicts fall into five distinct categories: attention seekers, control players, concealers, innovative malcontents, and revengers. It would seem that in any type of employee conflict, the administrator has a major decision to make in terms of ignoring the conflict or in intervening in it. While it is not an easy decision to make, the ability to decide properly is an important skill for a personnel administrator. In managing conflict, a key element is feedback, which can be used as an effective communication tool. Employee feedback allows the individual responsible for conflict management to have a certain degree of awareness of potential conflict sources within an organization; this is the first meaningful step toward both prevention and effective management of the conflict. In conclusion, conflict management--above all else--requires accomplished communication skills. Continued work on interpersonal communication skills will provide rich rewards for those responsible for personnel administration. (KM)

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MANAGING CONFLICT WITH EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS

ADDRESS AT THE 49TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF

THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL

PERSONNEL ADMINISTRATORS

SAN DIEGO, CA

OCT. 22, 1987

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Before I begin my presentation today on "Managing Conflict With Effective Communication Skills" let me share with you something of my interest in this topic. More than twenty years as a public school administrastor, including significant periods of time as a building-level principal, assistant superintnendent for instruction and superintendent has led me to three definitive conclusions:

1. That conflict, both major and minor, is inherent in any organization, regardless of how small or large it might be.
2. That one of the most difficult tasks administrators face, especially those involved with personnel, is conflict management.
3. And finally, that effective communication skills can be the best and most useful tool one possesses in dealing with organizational and personal conflict.

In addition, my brief experience as a professor of educational administration, in teaching school personnel administration, has convinced me that "managing conflict with effective communications" can be taught. While the time we have together this afternoon is extremely limited, I trust that we can accomplish at least four objectives in relation to this topic:

1. First, to familiarize you with the nature and characteristics of organizational conflict.

2. Secondly, to assist you in identifying effective communication skills.
3. Thirdly, to help you recognize the important role that feedback plays in reducing or defusing conflicts.
4. Finally, to assist you in acquiring skills in managing conflicts within your own organization.

Let me begin by sharing with you some basic considerations concerning organizational conflict, particularly as they occur in an educational setting.

1. First of all, conflict is, of course, a basic social process; there is no conceivable way of removing all conflict from an organization.
2. Conflict is inherent in any organization---large or small---however, it sometimes seems that in education we have more than our share of disagreements and misunderstandings.
3. This is especially true for those of you who deal with any aspect of the personnel function.
4. However, it is quiet apparent that all of us bring at least some of this conflict upon outselves.
5. Unmanaged conflict can be disruptive. Even to the extent of interfering or interrupting the educational process.
6. Most of us fear conflict and will go to almost any extreme to avoid it. But for those of us in personnel administration, we must recognize that it goes with the turf.
7. Conflict can damage an organization by lowering staff morale and employee productivity, and by driving people out of the organization.

8. Interdependency of people and tasks contribute to conflict in such areas as:

   a. Disputes or disagreements over turf and authority

   b. Legitimate competition for limited resources

   c. Differences in perspectives, objectives and modes of operation

   d. Misunderstandings in communications

Please note that communications are both a major contrivbutor to creating conflict, and as I will indicate later, it also can be a major factor in defusing conflict.

It would seem to me that it would be profitable at this point to spend a few minutes examining the difference between problem people and people with problems. It should suffice to say that I believe you can help the matter, but God help you with the former.

Difficult employees, it seems to me, fall into five categories. I call them:

1. Attention Seekers - This type of individual wants recognition and exhibits several telltale signs: pounting, crying and continually asking questions.

2. Control Players - This type of employee want to show who is more important. Argumentive, angry outbursts and public embarrassment are tactics used by these individuals.

3. Concealers - This type of person wants to mask their inadequacies and destroy any effort at two-way communications. They are never going to let you know what they are doing.

4. Innovative Malcontents - This individual wants to be innovative one

way or another. If they cannot express their creativity in a constructive, task-related manner, they will exercise their minds in counter-productive ways.

5. Revengers - This type of person feels hurt, used, deceived and/or harassed and therefore wants to get even.

It would seem that in any type of employee conflict the administrator has a major decision to make in terms of ignoring the conflict or in intervening in it. While it is not an easy decision to make, the ability to decide properly is an important skill for a personnel administrator. To determine which option to take we need to look at three dimensions of the conflict:

1. Simple vs. Complex issue characteristics
   a. If issues are simple they will be (1) few in number, (2) similar in context, (3) clearly delineated in all parties minds and (4) not emotionally charged.
   b. If issues are complex they will be (1) many in number, (2) diverse in content, (3) ambiguous and seen differently by all parties involved and (4) emotionally charged.
   c. If the problem is simple you should ignor, if it is complex you should intervene.
2. Second dimension - Past and future relationships
   a. You should consider the character of past relationships between the parties and weigh requirements for their future interaction.
   b. If the parties have not had past conflict, nor is it likely that they will have much interaction in the future, then ignor.

c. However, if they have had past disputes or disagreements and will be required to work closely together in the future, then intervene.

d. Other factors to weigh in this second dimensions are:

(1) Whether the individuals have equal or unequal status and power in the organization.

(2) Their abilities to communicate and negoatiate with each others.

3. The third dimension - The need for the administrators control over the outcome of the conflict.

Ask yourself questions such as:

a. Is the conflict disruptive to the organizations success and accomplishments?

b. Does the conflict diminish my administrative authority?

c. Do you have the skills to negotiate the conflict successfully?

d. Is the dispute contributing to lower staff morale?

If the answer to any of these questions are "yes", you will want to intervene.

At this point in the discussion let me share with you several broad factors that I believe will contribute to reduced staff conflicts or disputes.

1. Shared goverance - staff share in decision-making
2. Providing a network of support services to employees
3. Developing a sense of pride in the organization
4. Increased internal and external communications
5. Providing adequate supplies, materials and physical setting

A great deal more could be said about conflict, but let me close this first portion of my presentation by defining for you some key factors in defusing staff conflict:

1. Exert extra efforts to resolve conflicts informally whenever possible.
2. Don't treat any dissatisfaction lightly or consider it unimportant.
3. Listen to all parties involved.
4. Assembly all pertinent facts deligently before making any statements.
5. Don't ridicule any grievances or conflict.
6. Avoid stalling, deferring or passing the buck.
7. Never use guesswork in attempting to resolve a conflict. Rely on facts.
8. Retain your poise and humor; refrain from losing your temper.
9. Have the courage to make unpopular decisions when necessary.
10. Stick with your decisions.

Before I approach the subject of communications and particularly the role that communications play in conflict management, lets spend a few minutes looking at another key element in conflict management, that being feedback. It appears that if feedback is to be utilized as an effective communication tool, whether or not conflict is involved, it must meet the following criteria:

1. Feedback must be specific - Too often we generalize both compliments and criticism.
2. Feedback must be consistent - It should not vary unpredictably between

overwhelming praise and harsh criticism. For example, the employee should not be praised for good performance at periodic reviews and then be given a poor annual performance rating.

3. Time is important in feedback - Feedback should be given as soon as possible after a specific event.
4. Feedback requires credibility - The administrator must be perceived by staff members as a fair amd accurate source of information.
5. Feedback must be accurate - The communications from the administrator to the subordinates must be perceived as accurate by the subordinates.

Let's look for a moment at three benefits of effective feedback which in turn can reduce organizational friction:

1. Feedback relieves employees from worrying needlessly about their job performance and the security of their jobs.
2. Secondly, it helps marginal employees to improve their job performance.
3. And thirdly, feedback provides systematic documentation in case of dismissal.

Another consideration of conflict management which relates to employee feedback is awareness of potential sources of conflict as the first meaningful step toward both prevention and effective management of the conflict.

Let us look at two factors relating to feedback that you control as an administrator:

1. The first is receptiveness .
   a. When first approached by a subordinate, what level of attention does he receive? Is the administrator typically involved in his own work?
   b. If the matter is of sufficient importance, are secretaries informed to hold calls, "I am yours, right now, for as long as is necessary".
   c. If it isn't possible to hold a sustained conversation immediately, are arrangements made for a specific time to meet, not a delay message such as "let's get together and discuss this matter".
   d. All of these considerations are central to the creation of a receptive interaction environment, consideded to be the initial condition for effective feedback.
2. The second factor is responsiveness.
   a. What is needed is not only an administrator who is receptive, but one that is willing to take action or make changes. Questions deserve answers, ideas deserve consideration and information-seeking deserves information.
   b. It is apparent that different employees require varying levels and types of feedback to sustain them and to motivate them.
   c. The administrator who consistently appears to be busy and on-the-go may set a terrific work-role model for subordinates, but may also create a "he's too busy for me to bother" norm.

I would like to spend the bulk of the remaining time this afternoon talking about communications. Let me begin by making some general comments about communications:

1. Communicating with confidence, authority and power is not a skill that comes naturally to most of us. Yet, there are great personal/professional rewards for those who master this skill.
2. Nothing says more about your potential for leadership than your ability to communicate effectively and to mediate conflicts.
3. James Cribben in his book, EFFECTIVE MANAGERIAL LEADERSHIP, list seven principles of organizational communications:
   a. Sender and receiver hear and see subjectively and selectively.
   b. Premises and assumptions underlie all communications.
   c. All communications reflects attitudes.
   d. Communications is an experience-based phenomenon.
   e. Communications is a function of the receiver's expectations.
   f. Either-or thinking can muddy communications.
   g. Words are uncertain vehicles for the transmission of ideas.

Further, much has been said about the role of body language in communications. For example, a person's posture can convey any number of messages: energy/fatigue; interest/boredom; approval/disapproval; anxiety/confidence; like/dislike; and approachable/unapproachable.

Let's look at some other non-verbal ways we communicate that you might not have considered:

1. Time - If an administrator makes a subordinate wait a long time for a scheduled meeting, it communicates a negative, disrespectful message.

2. Furniture arrangement of your office - Are chairs in front of the desk---therby using the desk as a psychological barrier.
3. Proximity to the individual conveys a message - Taking a position close to the other person conveys a feeling of warmth and positive attitude.
4. Finally, eye contact is important to good communications.

There are a number of other barriers to communications that we should consider:

1. A basic lack of trust between people because of previous experiences.
2. Use of educational jaron that can create confusion. It is either not understood at all or interpreted in a way that is not meant.
3. The emotional state of the receiver. Waiting is sometimes best.
4. Poor timing of a message.
5. A communicator who doesn't really believe what he is communicating.
6. Failure to listen carefully to responses or, in the case of written communications, to monitor them carefully.

Arch Lustberg recently wrote an article in NATION'S BUSINESS entitled "Turning Confrontation Into Communications". He suggested the following four points in controlling confrontation:

1. Concentrate on your attitude. A natural tendency is to strike or shout back. That is a waste of energy. Calmly explain your stand and be positive.
2. Concentrate on breathing and relaxation. Proper breathing creates an almost instant feeling of well-being and eases tention and stress.
3. Know exactly what you want to do. Take time to plan you strategy.

Determine what you want to accomplish and how you can best make your point. Never lose sight of your objective.

4. Speak clearly, simply and concisely. Don't think that there is a need for big words or jaron to make yourself appear "knowledgable". Speak plain English.

In order to better appreciate your own abilities to use communications to manage conflict, you need to recognize the ways you are currently coming across to others. Much like holding your present communication style up to a mirror. Ask yourself questions such as:

1. How do others usually react to my suggestions?
2. Do I seem to have an influence on the actions and attitudes of those around me?
3. When I begin to speak do others stop and listen? Or, do I have to force my way into a conversation.
4. Do subordinates often ask my opinon when there is a dispute or a difference of opinion?
5. When I talk with employees does it tend to defuse anger or increase hostilities?

Let me suggest to you some very concrete actions you can take to manage conflict in your school or organization:

1. Deal with performance, not personalities. Nothing says you have to like all of your employees, or they like you.
2. Offer feedback continually.
3. Be a willing negotiator and compromier. While you are boss, you can still compromise.
4. Learn to count to ten in order to control your temper.

5. Be supportive, rather than always cricical.
6. Design your staff meetings to emphasize ways to bring people together.
7. Provide presence---get out from behind your desk and deal directly with people to people problems./

In closing, let me say that managing conflict requires above all else that you have accomplished communications skills. Continue to work on your communication skills for it will provide rich rewards as a personnel administrator.